/1/ Chapter 1

Geographical Location and Climate

131 The Pahouin country covers about 180, 000 square kilometers, from the middle Sanaga (4° 30' N) to the mouth of the Ogooué (1° 20' S) in latitude, from the Atlantic (9° 30' E) to the middle Sanga (14° E) in longitude. The inhabitants are politically under the jurisdiction of the Cameroons, Spanish Guinea, and French Equatorial Africa (Gabon and Middle Congo).

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133 The country appears essentially as a plateau of rocks, crystalline in the north, metamorphic in the south, with somewhat worn, intrusive domes, separated from the sea by a worn mountain range of rarely more than 1, 000 meters cut by the gorges of coastal rivers. The mean altitude varies from 500 to 700 meters up to the deep fault of the lower Ogooué Valley.

The watershed between the Congo and the coastal river basins bends toward the southeast from the Nkolomendim (the mountain-of-the-waters) massif in the Sangmélima subdivision. The principal tributary of the Congo, by way of the Sanga, is the Dja (N'Goko). The principal coastal rivers are the Sanaga and the Nyong, the N'Tem (Campo), the Muni, and the Ogooué.

132 805 The climate is of the humid equatorial type, modified by the altitude and characterized by a double alternation of dry and rainy seasons. The time measure of the Pahouin is the mbu, about six lunar cycles (ngon), and the solar year is divided as follows: (1)

1. The dates are approximately valid for the Cameroons-Gabon border. The terms are in Boulou; in Fang they would be: oyum, sugha, or sughe.

mid-June to mid-December: ôyôn (little dry season) and su'u (great rainy season)

mid-December to mid-June: ésep (great dry season) sometimes characterized by bikone (small rains)

Mean temperatures and rainfall are indicated on the table on page 3.

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had not done so, the clan chose its chief, and the neighboring populations each sent him a spear in token of recognition.

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The power of the Fong chief is on an even more personal level. The chief conveys his commands by means of an enormous drum; his pipe is preserved like a relic; his musicians play special instruments, among them the nkeñ (percussion double bell), quite rare in that region but a classical instrument in the western Cameroons with the Bamiléké or Bamoum /Mum/. The chief's installation is marked by the tradition of the spears and the donning of a headpiece of parrot plumes. (J. B.)

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Any more extensive authority was founded on personal prestige, which always aroused resentment. Authority was never conferred except temporarily, and it was quite often withdrawn from the holder before term.

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French, German, and Spanish administrations have attempted to set up a hierarchical system of authority that it has never been possible really to impose upon the country. The three administrations all made the initial mistake of trying to establish this authority on a territorial basis, which is completely—or nearly—foreign to these nomadic people. Only village chiefship had some resemblance to a customary institution, provided that the choice of chief fell upon a nɔ̀ɔ̀l mɔ̂t, a genuine senior, and that his brothers accepted his authority. Canton and higher chiefdoms had no cohesion except insofar as the incumbent had authority or administrative support. At the beginning of the colonial period, however, these functions were very often entrusted to genuine bejɔ̂ɔ̂ bɔ̂t, /62/ well-known war chiefs, high initiates of societies like the ngil, or celebrated magicians. Later on, it became more difficult to find, even among opposition ranks, chiefs possessed of real authority. After 1945 there was an attempt in the Cameroons to reorganize the system of authority on a clan basis (the Bourdier-Granier reform), then on village lines (the Christol system), finally ending up with a municipal type of system.

Given Pahouin interest in a political system based on election, which pretty well corresponds both with their individualism and with their mistrust of individuals, it may be that such a system has some chance of success if it is allowed to become Pahounized.

5. Associations

Traditional associations were undoubtedly less developed among the Pahouin than among other African societies with more closely knit or more stable hierarchical structures. The social groups at the core of clans or villages arose and decayed in accordance with migrations and "swarmings-off." They showed a kinship rather than an associational character.

Nevertheless, there existed within kinship as well as outside it associations not based on descent, voluntary and not de facto /discretionary?/. These were often characterized by initiations and had a magical or religious basis, with varying purposes.

The minsamba, "societies," were temporary, organized for a military operation (ôban, mvêle) or for a trade journey to the coast or to the "trading-posts" of the Ogooué. The men who took part often came from different villages or even from different clans bound by an alliance (êlat). They swore an oath of loyalty and mutual assistance, involving a ritual sacrifice followed by a communion meal; for a war enterprise, there might be a human victim, especially if it were a matter of avenging the death, kum mbim, of a monyaŋ (brother) and if there were a prisoner of war available to sacrifice. The association was dissolved once its end had been accomplished, but a bond persisted between its members.

Similar temporary associations could be formed for large elephant hunts; they were moreover often confused with the mamba dulu or nsamba ayak (traveling society, trade society) afterward organized for the sale of the ivory.

The most important permanent associations were those among the initiates of different rites. But what was most often involved in these was a kind of relationship by way of a rite, which was not the rite's real purpose, or was so only adventitiously. When, for instance, all the inhabitants of a village took part in the êsye purification rite, a strengthening of the fraternal ties among them certainly ensued, but the prime purpose was purification (1). /63/